

The Unfinished Portrait

A new film exploring the life of the last Squire of Fellbrigg

Researched and produced by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester, for the National Trust's Prejudice and Pride programme.

Narrated by Stephen Fry.

Audio descriptive transcript

This film lasts for just under seven minutes. Against a black background, the oak leaf and acorn logo of the National Trust appears in white, followed by the film's title, *The Unfinished Portrait*. A rural landscape rushes past us, blurred as if viewed from a moving car. There are golden, sunlit fields beyond a hedge, and branches hang down from tall trees along the road. Stephen Fry, in voice-over, asks:

How can we paint someone's *true* portrait? We very often start with official sources, looking for their notable achievements, the positions they held in public life or the works they published.

A country house appears at a distance, on the far side of a grassy meadow. It's the south front of Felbrigg Hall. The main 17th century building is of red brick and warm stone. The entrance porch is flanked by bay windows on ground and first floor and there are three groups of tall terracotta chimney pots on the roof. We approach the imposing front door of dark wood studded with nails. It swings open, and we move through ground floor rooms as Stephen Fry continues:

For Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer, the Last Squire of Felbrigg, these sources reveal a life of public duty: a Justice of the Peace; High Sheriff of Norfolk; a respected and much-loved local patron; a celebrated biographer and scholar.

They reveal a shy, generous, unmarried man who restored his exquisite ancestral home and bequeathed it the nation.

The camera passes into the Great Hall, taking in the classical busts on pillars and stained glass in the tall windows, and a desk that seems to have been left only a moment before . a pair of folded spectacles rest on a book with an ornate leather binding. The camera settles on an oil painting of a man in his sixties, with white hair round a bald pate. He sits in a carved armchair, facing to the left, and apparently lost in thought. He wears a shirt and tie and a jacket in a subdued grey that tones with the furniture and panelled wall behind him.

Fry wonders, ~~B~~ut is our portrait complete?

A white-haired man sits alongside the portrait of Robert. He is of similar age and appearance, wearing similar clothes. He sits in the carved armchair shown in the portrait, adopting the same thoughtful pose as Robert. The camera wavers a little, holding the painting and the living, breathing man in the same frame. The man stands and moves off to the left, going through an arched doorway and heading upstairs. In a soft pool of light at the far end of the dark hallway, there is a marble sculpture of a boy, his foot resting on his knee as he removes a thorn, a version of the classical sculpture known as ~~S~~pinarioq

The narration continues: ~~O~~fficial accounts of Robert's life tend to offer only a partial story, and neglect to incorporate what was widely accepted by those who knew him.

~~S~~ome adopt a language of codes and suggestions, describing him as %the bachelor squire+õ or ~~n~~ot one for the ladies+.

But the truth is, when researching Robert's life, we find many first hand accounts that openly acknowledge his homosexuality, adding . of course . that to be gay when he lived could lead to prosecution under the law.

Researching Robert's life highlights the problems we encounter when looking back at the lives of people who defied the conventions of their day. If we ask questions about these individuals' personal lives we often find that records have been destroyed, we find deafening silences and awkward euphemisms that reflect and perpetuate the pernicious attitudes of the times in which they lived.

The man climbs stairs covered with a thick, patterned carpet and crosses a landing. He enters a room and pauses in front of a large window with small rectangular panes of glass. He turns to the left, his profile becoming a silhouette against the window. The blue sky and green landscape beyond is veiled by a white gauze blind.

The narration continues: What fine detail, then, can we add to our portrait of this remarkable man to help us build a full, fair and respectful likeness?

We can add that he had a free and expressive life before duty and obligation took hold.

A drawn animation of a white pigeon settles on his profile, dissolving into white as a flock of animated pigeons take off towards us. A close up shows the yellowed cover of a copy of Oxford Outlook, a literary review, from May 1925.

At Oxford in the 1920s, Robert's deeply-felt poetry was published alongside the work of his contemporaries: Christopher Isherwood, Harold Acton, Graham Greene and W. H. Auden.

Further animations fill the screen with bookshelves with volumes including Robert's own books. Handwritten words appear on a page: "He was filled with disquiet, for he understood the secrets of his own nature." A family tree appears, leading to the name of Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer, born 1906. Inkspots dissolve, spread and grow like vegetation.

Fry continues: "We can add that Robert had an instinctive understanding of human nature. In his acclaimed biographies of Horace Walpole and Thomas Gray, he didn't shy away from his subjects' same-sex desires. He acknowledged the challenges they faced, chronicling their lives with honesty and compassion.

"Far from the sad sense of his being the last name on the last branch of his family tree, we can add that Robert was rooted physically, intellectually and socially in his beloved Norfolk.

"He was admired and befriended by creative, unconventional people. His private books overflow with personal dedications and intimate notes . . . from Stevie Smith, A.L Rowse, and Anthony Powell among others."

The animation dissolves into a video image of a tangle of bare branches, echoing the shape of the inkspot. The white-haired man stands alone behind the branches, his arms folded protectively. The image bleaches to a white screen.

"But his portrait isn't complete without considering his greatest legacy.

"Aged just 35, Robert's resolution to leave Felbrigg Hall to the National Trust came soon after learning of his younger brother's tragic death in 1941.

Robert's decision was made in the knowledge that he himself would never marry, and there would be no heirs.

Through animation, hardback books stack up, one after another. Among them is a pale blue pamphlet. The title appears, handwritten in capital letters on the spine.

Finally, we must add, that among a pile of Robert's books lies a small, blue government report published in 1957. On its spine, Robert has written its unofficial title: the Wolfenden Report.

Its recommendations to decriminalise homosexual acts did not become law until 1967, two years before Robert's death.

What would our subject have made of the changes it heralded, and the lives it has helped to liberate?

On screen, the front cover of the report appears, showing its full title: Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution

Fifty years on, beyond the language of clues, hints and broad brushstrokes, today we must celebrate our LGBTQ histories in plain sight.

To do anything less is to suggest that same-sex love and gender diversity is somehow wrong, and lets past prejudice and discrimination go unchallenged.

As a tolerant, generous and honest biographer himself, this fuller portrait of Robert is perhaps one that he would recognise and appreciate.

The film ends by showing the white-haired man, now wearing bow tie and tuxedo, shaking hands with a visitor. As he chats to a group of visitors who wear informal summer clothes, back in the first room we visited, the Great Hall, the man points something out . perhaps a painting on the wall, the rich carvings, or the stained glass. We realise that he is perhaps one of the volunteer guides who welcome visitors to Felbrigg Hall today. The video fades to black. A title appears in white letters: ~~S~~onnet by Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer, 1925q As Stephen Fry reads the sonnet, small images of the landscape around Felbrigg Hall appear: trees in a field, a close up of oak leaves rustling in the wind, wavering purple and gold meadow flowers, treetops against the sky. The sonnet reads:

As a pigeon startled up from under trees,
Scattering leaves with the stir of its rising, goes
Blundering through the shifting sunlight, and flies
Slanting up, seeking the open skies:
Then batters its wings through yielding twigs, and sees
The waving green of the woods recede, and knows
Its power, and loves higher and higher to rise,
Its breast and wings by the sun flushed golden and rose.

So a thought of you rises up with keen swift flight
Out of the prisoning thickets into the light,
Forgetting a little while all doubt, all pain:
Thinking never to pause and descend again
To the cold perilous earth and the dark of night,
Up into measureless heavens the wild wings strain.

The final titles are:

Narration . Stephen Fry

Research, concept and script . Tom Butler, Julie Howell and
Richard Sandell

Visual direction and video . Lea Nagano

With thanks to Jo Crocker, Stephen Fry, Heather Smith, Rachael
Lennon, Matt Smith, Jocelyn Dodd and Sarah Plumb; and the
amazing volunteers and staff at Felbrigg Hall, especially Mari Chalk,
Dodie Daintith, James Haldane O'Hare, Susan Lee, Bonnie
Lovelock, Fiona Rogers, John Wing as The Squire and Robert
Wynn.

The final title reads: produced by Research Centre for Museums
and Galleries and University of Leicester, copyright 2017 National
Trust and University of Leicester.